R E P O R T R E S U M E S

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A NOTE ON THE RELATION OF READING FAILURE TO PEER-GROUP STATUS IN URBAN GHETTOS.

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REPORT NUMBER BR-5-0545 PUB DATE 27 JUL 67
REPORT NUMBER CRP-3288
CONTRACT OEC-6-10-059
EDRS PRICE MF-$0.25 HC-$0.80 18P.

DESCRIPTORS- *NEGRO YOUTH, *GHETTOS, NEGRO EDUCATION, *COMMUNITY SURVEYS, SOCIAL VALUES, GROUP MEMBERSHIP, *SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT, COOPERATING TEACHERS, *READING RESEARCH, SOUTH CENTRAL HARLEM,

A PROGRESS REPORT OF THE COOPERATIVE RESEARCH PROJECT CONCERNING THE EFFECTS OF VALUE SYSTEMS UPON SCHOOL LEARNING AMONG GHETTO CLUB MEMBERS IS PRESENTED. STREET GROUP MEMBERS CONSIDERED SCHOOL LEARNING IRRELEVANT TO PRESTIGE WITHIN THE GROUP. THEY WERE CONCERNED WITH TOUGHNESS, SMARTNESS, TROUBLE, EXCITEMENT, AUTONOMY, AND FATE. FULL PARTICIPATION MEANT COMPLETE INVOLVEMENT WITH THE VALUES AND ACTIVITIES OF THE GROUP. THE ACADEMIC RECORDS OF 75 PREADOLESCENT AND ADOLESCENT BOYS WHO WERE NONMEMBERS OF STREET GROUPS INDICATED THAT SOME WERE BELOW, SOME WERE WITHIN, AND OTHERS WERE BEYOND GRADE LEVEL IN ACCOMPLISHMENT. LEARNING WAS TAKING PLACE. READING AMONG 43 STREET GROUP MEMBERS SHOWED A REGULAR DISTRIBUTION AROUND A SINGLE MODE, 3 YEARS BEHIND GRADE. THERE WERE MANY DROPOUTS. OVERALL FINDINGS INDICATED THAT CULTURAL CONFLICT WAS RESPONSIBLE FOR READING FAILURE. SUGGESTIONS FOR CONTINUING STUDY INCLUDE THE INTRODUCTION OF A CULTURAL INTERMEDIARY CLASSROOM TO DEVELOP TECHNIQUES FOR CROSS-CULTURAL COOPERATION. (MC)

ED018343

July 27, 1967

A NOTE ON THE RELATION OF READING FAILURE TO PEER-GROUP STATUS IN URBAN GHETTOS

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For the past several years, we have been studying certain conflicts between the vernacular of the urban ghettos and school-room English, especially in relation to reading failure.[1] We work primarily with peer-groups of Negro boys within the culture of the street, since we believe that the major controls upon language are exerted by these groups rather than the school or the home. Our research has recently revealed a sharp and striking relationship between participation in this street culture and reading failure. The pattern is so clear and plainly so important in understanding the educational problems of ghetto areas, that we are sending this brief note to all those who have shown interest in our progress reports.

1. The populations concerned

In the summer of 1965, we interviewed a sample of 75 Negro boys, age 10 to 12 years, in a geographically random sample of "educational day camps" in Harlem. Boys had to be enrolled by their parents in these recreational programs, held in school-yards and playgrounds, so that there was a bias of selection for children from intact families with support for educational

RE 001 180

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goals. Nevertheless, we found that the majority of these 10-12 year olds had serious difficulty in reading aloud such second- and third-grade sentences as

> Now I read and write better than Alfred does.
> When I passed by, I read the sign.

In August of 1965, we turned to the study of groups of boys in their natural associations on the streets of South Central Harlem. Our normal method of work was to interview a few individuals, locate their peer group and become acquainted with it; we then studied the language of the peer group in spontaneous interaction, and recorded the remaining individuals in face-to-face interviews. We used this approach first in studying two pre-adolescent groups in a low-income project, the "Thunderbirds" and the "Aces", against the general population of the project. We then began the study of the major adolescent groups that dominated the tenement areas from 110th Street to 118th Street between Sixth and Eighth Avenues. One of our staff members, Mr. John Lewis, acted as a participant-observer in the area. With his help, we followed two major adolescent groups, each composed of many subgroups, for two years. These groups were known as the "Cobras" and the "Jets".[2]

Our knowledge of the social structure, history, activities, and value systems of these groups is an essential aspect of the finding to be presented in this note. We traced the history of group relations and explored the value systems through individual face-to-face interviews, meetings with small groups of two or three close friends, and group sessions with six to twelve boys. In all these sessions, involving the most excited physical and

verbal interaction, each person's statements and ideas were recorded on a separate track from a microphone several inches away from his mouth. We also studied group behavior in various field trips with the boys, and recorded their interaction en route. Most importantly, our participant-observer saw the boys every day on the streets, and met with them in their hang-outs and our "club-house". He was present at several moments of crisis when fighting was about to break out between the two major groups.

We also interviewed a number of isolated individuals in the same tenement areas, who were definitely not members of these groups, but who often knew about them. We are able then to assert that we reached all the major "named" groups in the area, although we did not have a representative sample of all adolescent boys. In the same areas we completed a stratified random sample of 100 adults, but only in the low-income projects did we relate our groups quantitatively to the total population.[3]

2. The nature of the street groups

The larger associations which bear the names "Jets" or "Cobras" are known to the boys as "clubs". They are not to be confused with the groups which are organized within recreation centers by adults, which are also called "clubs" and sometimes overlap in membership. The groups we studied are initiated by the boys themselves, and are disapproved of by the adults in the neighborhood.[4]

The structure and value systems of these groups are partly inherited from the period of gang violence of the 1940's

and 1950's. The frequency of group fighting, however, is comparatively low. These are not "gangs" in the sense of groups which frequently fight as a unit. Nevertheless, a major source of prestige for the leaders is skill in fighting, and individual fights are very common. The inter-group conflicts which do occur are the most important sources of group cohesion; they become a fixed part of the mythology and ideology of the group, and the obligation to support one's fellow members in a group fight is strongly felt by many members.

The general value systems of these groups conforms to the lower class value pattern which has been described by Walter B. Miller.[5] The focal concerns of the groups are toughness, smartness, trouble, excitement, autonomy, and fate. Intelligence or smartness is used and valued as a means of manipulating others, rather than a means of obtaining information or solving abstract problems. The specific values of the Negro nationalist movement are reflected in some groups more than others. The members of the "Cobras", within the period that we worked with them, moved from a moderately nationalist position to deep involvement with the militant Muslim religion and its complex ideology.[6] This ideology involved the members in a strong interest in learning and abstract knowledge; but the general value systems of all the groups were such that school learning was seen as hostile, distant, and essentially irrelevant.

The groups have a formal structure which may include four officers: president, vice-president, prime minister and

war-lord. Junior organizations are often formed by the appointment of a younger brother of an officer to a leading position among the 10-to-13-year-olds. However, this formal structure can be misleading. The day-to-day activities of the boys[7] are in smaller, informal hang-out groups, determined by geography and age; an individual's association with the larger group is often a matter of formal definition of his identity more than anything else.[8] Yet the ultimate sanction of the larger group and its fighting role is often referred to.

Sources of prestige within the group are physical size, toughness, courage and skill in fighting; skill with language in ritual insults, verbal routines with girls, singing, jokes and story-telling; knowledge of nationalist lore; skill and boldness in stealing; experience in reform schools; and connections with family members or others which provide reputation, money, hang-outs, marijuana, or other material goods. Success in school is irrelevant to prestige within the group, and reading is rarely if ever used outside of school.[9]

4. Group membership

Full participation in the group consists of <u>endorsement</u> of this set of values, and <u>acceptance</u> of a set of personal obligations to others within the same environment and value system. The criterion of formal membership ("you are a Jet" or "you are <u>not</u> a Jet") is often disputed. A few individuals want to be members and are rejected; others could easily be members but

do not care to. Full membership, as we define it, means that the individual is thoroughly involved with the values and activities of the group, and is defined as a member both by himself and by others. If some but not all of these criteria are fulfilled, we term the individual a 'marginal member'. The clearest evidence for full membership as against marginal status is provided by the symmetrical and asymmetrical relations in a sociometric diagram.[10] If an individual on the outskirts of the group wants to be a member, yet is prevented by the influence of other environments (family, school) and other value systems, he is classed with other non-members. In each area there are "social groups" which are strongly influenced by adult organizations: we do not include membership in such groups in the category of membership which we are studying.

It has been shown in many similar situations that group membership is a function of age.[11] Boys 8-to-9-years-old are definitely outsiders for the groups we are studying, and they have only a vague knowledge of group activities. Membership is strongest in the 13-to-15-year-old range, and falls off rapidly in the later teens. A few 18-or-19-year-old boys act as seniors, especially if younger brothers are serving as officers, but as a rule older boys drift off into different activities.

It is difficult to estimate the percentage of boys who are full participants in the street culture. However, in the one 13-story low income project which we studied intensively,[12] there were 22 boys 10-to-12 years old. Their relationships to the major peer group, the "Thunderbirds", were as follows:

members	marginal members	non-members
12	3	7

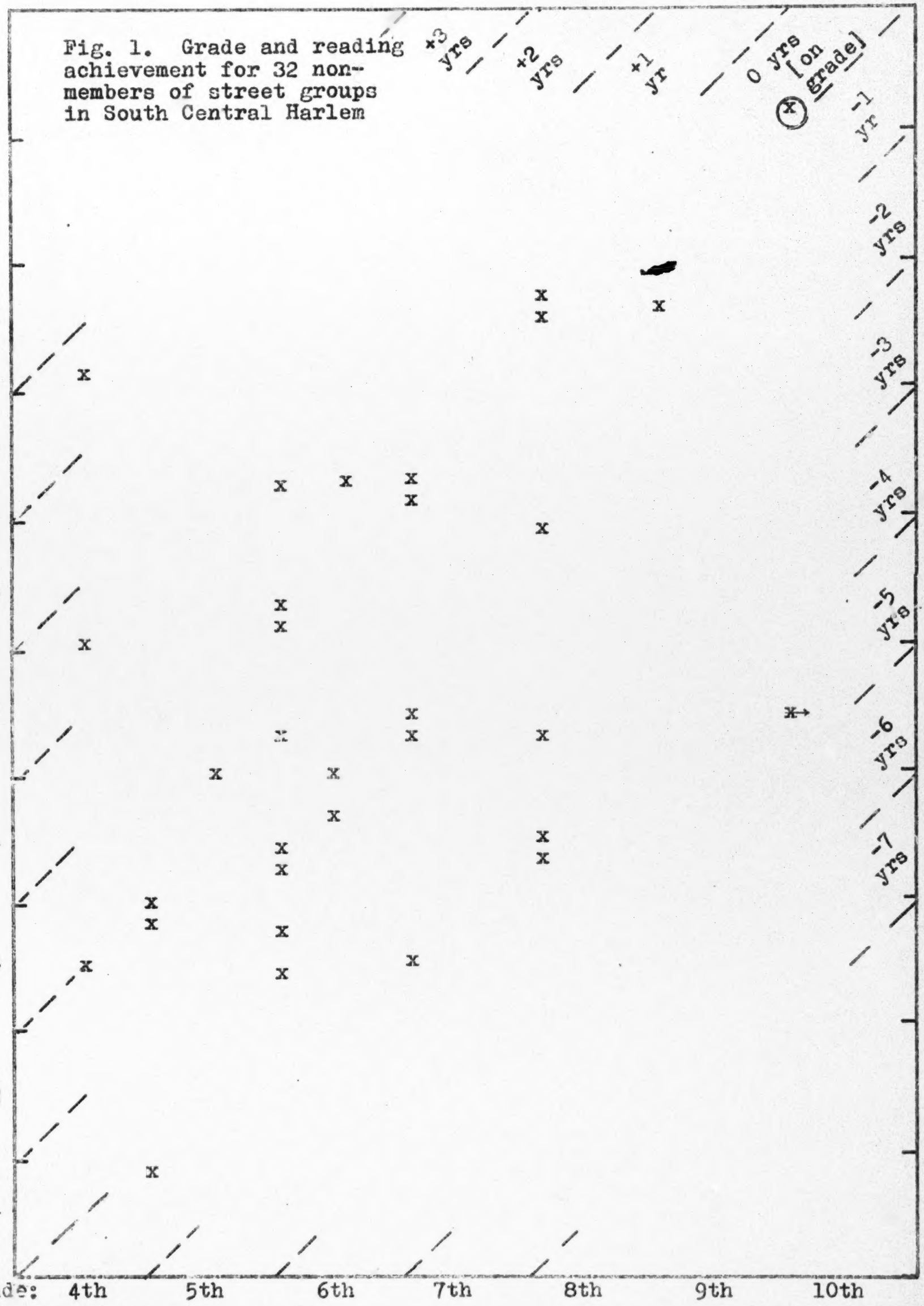
Our general experience would indicate that 50 to 60 per cent of the boys in the age range 10-to-16 are full participants in the street culture we are studying here.

5. Reading records

In all of our individual interviews, we used a number of special reading tests developed to yield specific information on the vernacular phonology and grammar.[13] However, the most direct evidence for reading performance in schools is obtained from the Metropolitan Achievement Test given every year in the New York City schools. With the help of the New York City Board of Education, we were able to study recently the academic records of 75 pre-adolescent and adolescent boys with whom we had worked in the years 1965 to 1967. The substance of this report is the correlation between the Metropolitan Achievement Reading Test and group membership.

Figure 1 shows the correlation between grade level and reading achievement for 32 boys we interviewed in the 110th-120th Street area who are not members of the street culture, or whose group status is unknown (from the educational day camp series). The horizontal axis is grade level at the time of the test; the vertical axis the Metropolitan Achievement Test score. Each individual's score and grade are indicated by the location of an x. The diagonal lines group together those who are reading on grade level [0], one to three years above grade

Fig. 1. Grade and reading achievement for 32 non-members of street groups in South Central Harlem



level [+3 - +1], or one to six years behind grade level [-1 - -6]. As one would expect, there are a good many boys who are two years behind grade, which is average in New York City, but there are also quite a few on grade and some ahead of grade level. Eleven of the 32 boys are on grade or above. The general direction of the pattern is upward, indicating that learning is taking place.

Figure 2 shows the same relationships for 43 boys who are members or marginal members of street groups in South Central Harlem. Each individual is represented by a letter symbolizing the group of which he is a member of to which he is most closely related. Upper case letters are full members, and lower case marginal members. *The over-all pattern is entirely different* from Figure 1: no one is reading above grade, only one boy is reading on grade, and the great majority are three or more years behind. Moreover, there are <u>no</u> boys who are reading above the 5th grade level, no matter what grade they are in. At each grade, the reading achievement for these boys form a lower, more compact group than for the same grade in Figure 1. The close concentration of boys in the eighth grade below the fifth grade level shows a limitation on achievement which is quite striking. On the whole, Figure 2 shows very little learning as compared to Figure 1.

The lower achievement of group members does not indicate over-all deficiency in verbal skills. Many of these boys are proficient at a wide range of verbal skills appropriate for group activity: the verbal leaders are indicated by circles in Figure 2. While several are clustered near the highest point of achievement, there are other verbal leaders near the bottom of the diagram.

The problems encountered by group members are cultural in origin. Overt evidence is provided by two groups of special cases: [1] Asterisks mark boys whose records indicate serious behavior problems in school--extreme belligerence, repeated violence, with page after page of notes on their records from social workers, psychologists and truant officers; [2] the letters with arrows through them, [T→], represent boys who have been expelled or suspended from school, discharged as overage, or removed from the system by other means; at the bottom of the diagram are four figures representing group members who have been sent to institutions so that their records are no longer available. There are no such cases in Figure 1.

The distribution of members, marginal members and non-members according to number of years behind grade is shown in Figure 3. The non-members show a bi-modal distribution which is in fact closely correlated with IQ scores.[14] Members of street groups show a regular distribution around a single mode, three years behind grade in reading. Marginal members, indicated by the cross-hatched areas, are plainly intermediate.

Although Figure 3 does indicate a handicap imposed by membership in street groups, the full pattern of Figure 2 is even clearer in this respect: it is the ceiling on achievement in the higher grades which is most disturbing. In our sample, we do not have as many boys 15 or 16 years old displayed, simply because many of them are already disappearing from the school system by one means or another.

Fig. 2. Grade and reading achievement for 43 members of street groups in South Central Harlem.

T, t = "Thunderbirds"
A, a = "Aces"
C, c = "Cobras"
J, j = "Jets"
other symbols: see text

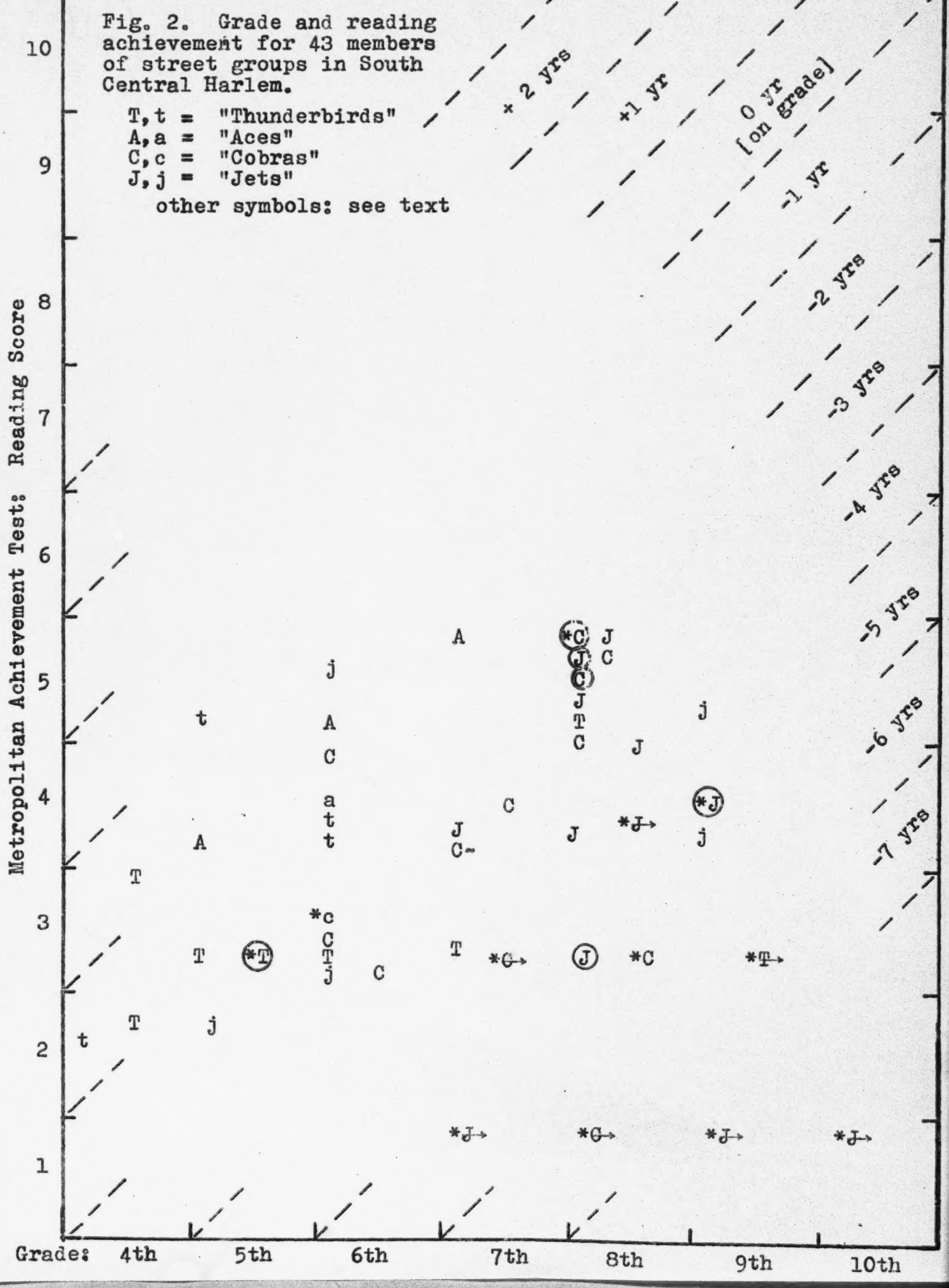
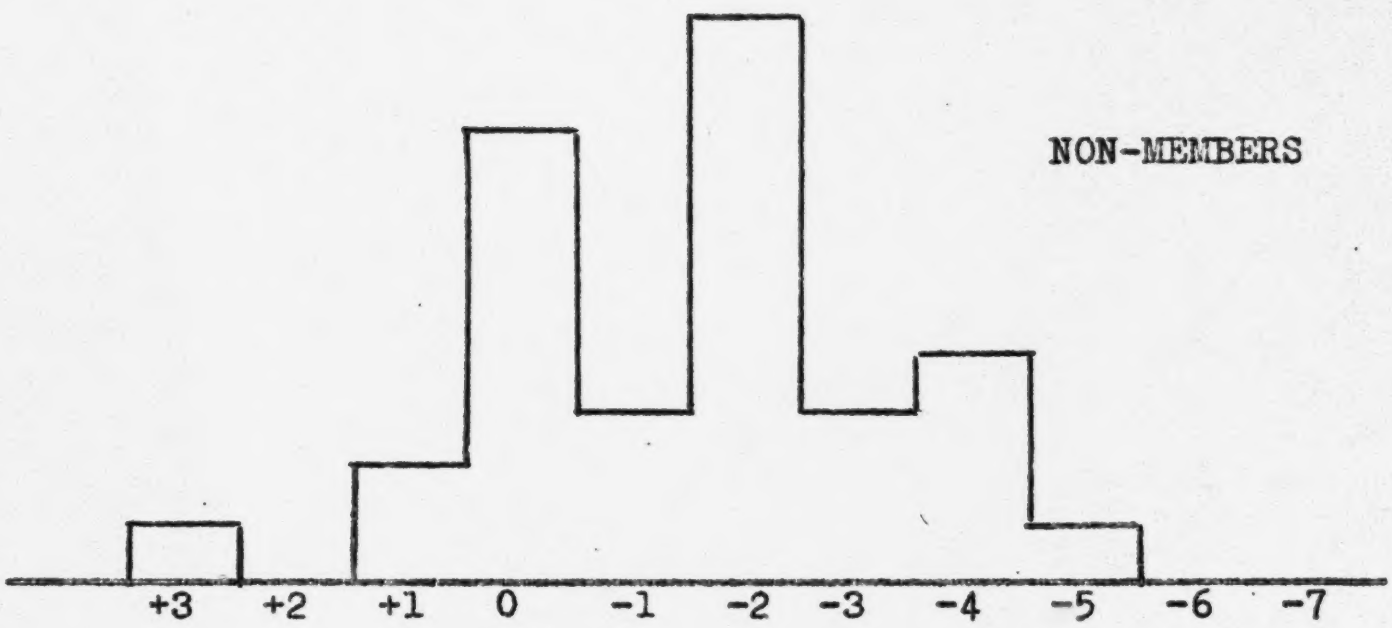
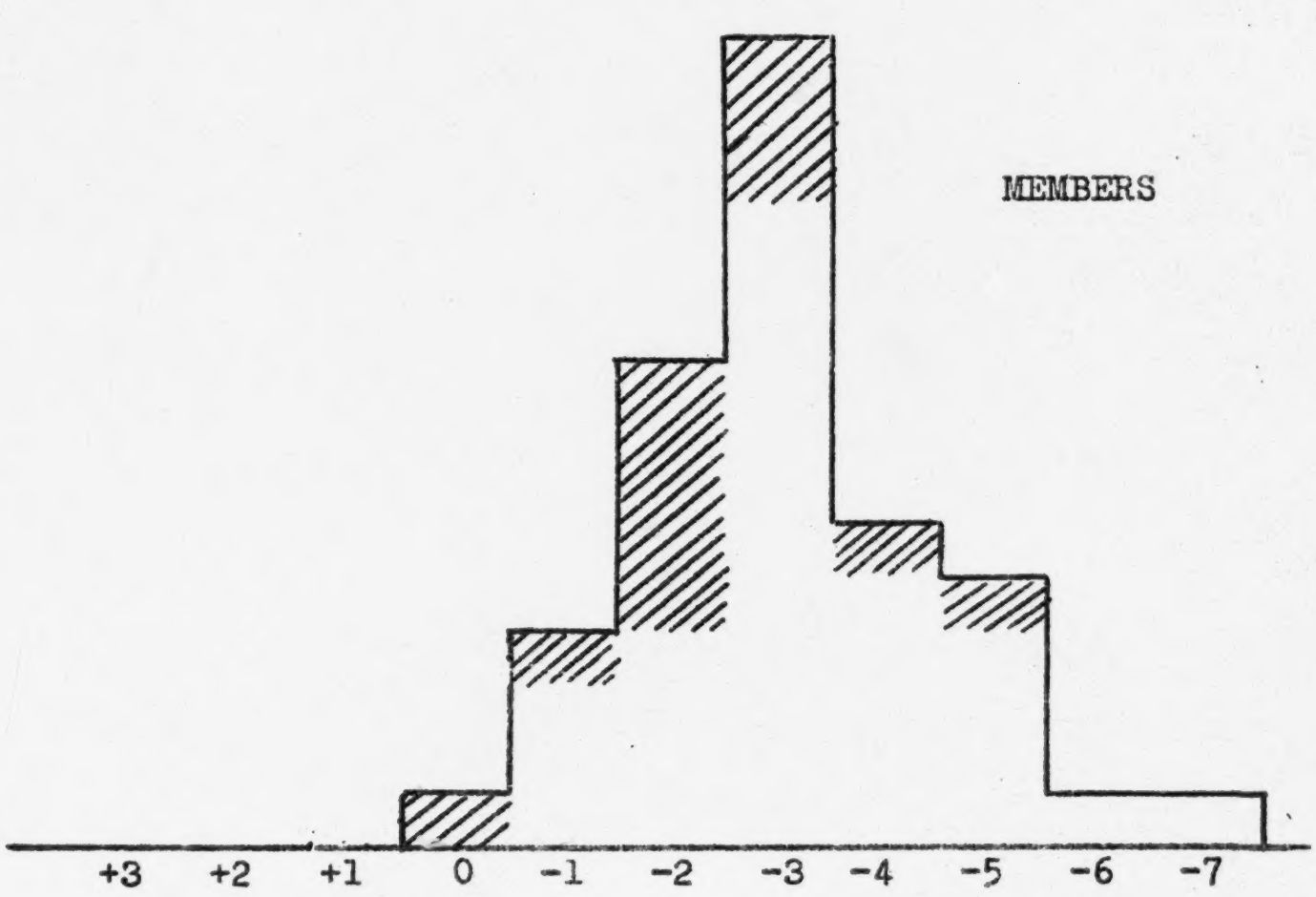


Fig. 3. Distribution of non-members, marginal members and members of street culture by years behind grade





marginal members

These findings are merely preliminary to our main body of correlations; we will shortly be able to provide more detailed data on a larger sample. There are a total of 170 boys whose reading abilities and language scores have been studied, and we will be able to correlate reading skill with many other factors besides membership in the street culture. However, the patterns revealed by Figures 1 and 2 are so striking that we thought all those interested in the problem should be aware of them as soon as possible.

6. What is to be done?

The over-all view given by Figure 2 strongly reinforces our view that the major problem responsible for reading failure is a cultural conflict. The school environment and school values are plainly not influencing the boys firmly grounded in street culture. The group which does show learning contains a large percentage of boys who do not fit in with street culture--who reject it or are rejected by it. For the majority, Figure 2 confirms indirect evidence that teachers in the city schools have little ability to reward or punish members of the street culture, or to motivate learning by any means.

The usual statistics on reading achievement in urban ghettos are alarming, but they do not reveal the full extent of reading failure. Research inside the schools cannot discriminate membership in the street culture from non-membership, and educators are therefore not aware of the full extent of the cul-

tural barrier between them and their students.

It should be understood that the educational goals of the adult Negro community are the same as that of our society as a whole. Our subjective evaluation tests, for example, show that adults in Harlem are almost unanimous in their norms of correct speech and the goals for language teaching in school. Many of the members of the street culture gradually break away and acquire these adult norms in their twanties. However, these norms are of little value for those who do not have the skills to put them into effect.

The reading failure that we have documented here is typical of other performance on the academic records. The pattern of failure is so widespraad, in many urban areas, that one cannot hold responsible any one system, school or teacher. The majority of these boys have not learned to read well enough to use reading as a tool for further learning. For many of them, there is no realistic possibility of graduating high school and acquiring the skills needed for the job market. In this particular note we are dealing only with the formal aspect of educational failure. In later publications, we will attempt to document the pessimism and despair with which these adolescents view their immediate future.

The absolute ceiling of Figure 2 is of course an artifact of the limited sample. We know from our own tests that there are group members who read very well, whose school records are not presently available. But even these rare individuals view the educational system with a profound cynicism. The majority of those who learn from the system are located in Figure 1.

We do not believe that the present college-educated teaching staff, Negro or white, has the specific knowledge of the street culture to solve this problem alone. Negro teachers raised in ghetto areas are not members of the current street culture. With a few rare exceptions, we find that success in education removes the individual from his culture so effectively that his knowledge of it becomes quite marginal. The specific knowledge of the street culture which is needed is only available to those who are in constant interaction with the peer groups on the streets. Part of the reason is that the value system, though quite general, is intensely local in focus. The factors that control language behavior are often local and immediate: what happened last year, last month, or yesterday to that particular subgroup is the best stimulus for evoking spontaneous speech. And the general configurations of the culture change rapidly even though the value system remains intact: a teacher raised in Harlem in the 1950's, returning to the streets today, would find it difficult to understand how and why gang fighting is no longer in style.

We hope to elaborate on these problems of communication in later publications. Here we would like to indicate briefly the form of one proposal we believe will be effective in solving the problem of Figure 2.

We propose that a cultural intermediary be introduced into the classroom in the person of a young Negro man, 16 to 25 years old, with high school level reading skills, but not a college graduate. We propose the creation of a special license to

allow this young man to carry out the following functions:

1. to acquaint the teacher with the specific interests of members of the class and help design reading materials centering on these interests.

2. to provide effective rewards and punishments that will motivate members of street culture for whom normal school sanctions are irrelevant.

3. to lead group discussion on topics of immediate concern to members of the class.

4. to lead boys in sports and other recreational activities in school time.

5. to maintain contact with boys outside of school, on the streets, and help organize extra-curricular activities.

We are well aware of the difficulties that any school system will have in absorbing such outside elements. The situation in most ghetto schools is plainly desperate enough so that many educators will be willing to endorse a proposal that may create such difficulties. We suggest that summer training schools be held for such special license teachers, in which regular teachers will participate, to develop jointly techniques for cross-cultural cooperation. At such training schools, it will also be possible to provide regular teachers and special license teachers with specific linguistic data of the type generated by our principal direction of research.

FOOTNOTES

[1]Data in this research note is the product of Cooperative Research Project 3288, "A Study of the Non-standard English of Negro and Puerto Rican Speakers in New York City", under OE-6-10-059. Preliminary linguistic findings of this research are published in "Some Sources of Reading Problems for Negro Speakers of Non-Standard English", in A. Frazier (ed.), New Directions in Elementary English (Champaign, Ill.: N.C.T.E., 1967), pp. 140-167, and available in "Some Suggestions for Teaching Standard English to Speakers of Non-Standard Urban Dialects", submitted to the Bureau of Curriculum Research of the Board of Education or of the City of New York.

[2]The names "Cobras" and "Jets" are here used as cover symbols for a complex of formal groups which changes over time. The "Cobras", in particular, was originally a group formed by mergers of several groups which in turn underwent mergers with other groups under successive changes in nationalist orientation.

[3]See below for relative sizes of street groups and isolated population in one project.

[4]The "Thunderbirds" are a partial exception here, since the club was formed in a recreation center (and was successively re-formed with different names); however, the identity of the group was not confined to the center, and it contained members who had been banned from the center.

[5]"Lower Class Culture as a Generating Milieu of Juvenile Delinquency", J. of Social Issues 14: 5-19, 1958.

[6]As noted above, the "Cobras" underwent a number of organizational transformations, with new officers, and merged with other groups as nationalist orientation increased.

[7]Major activities are flying pigeons, playing basketball, playing cards, petty theft, playing pool, smoking marijuana, hanging out. . . although not all members participate in all of these activities. The groups as formal wholes have relatively few activities.

[8]The problem of group identity, and the obligations which accompany membership, is not fully solved.

[9]As one indication of the importance of reading in the group, we may consider one pair of boys who were best friends and saw each other every day. One read extremely well, the other not at all: the other's performance was a total surprise to each.

[10]The most important data is derived from the question, "Who are the guys [cats] you hang out with?", supplemented with other questions on group leaders, best friends, and all other mentions of individuals in relevant roles.

[11]Cf. Peter Wilmott, Adolescent Boys in East London (London: 1966), p. 35. In answer to a question on main companions in spare time, 57 per cent of those 14-15 years old indicated a group of other males;, 44 per cent of those 16-18 years old; and only 32 per cent of those 19-20 years old.

[12]The building studied here is 1390 Fifth Avenue.

[13]Gray's Oral Reading Test was also given to a section of the population for further calibration on school approaches to reading.

[14]There is a close correlation between reading achievement and the Pinter-Cunningham IQ test (given in the early grades in New York City in former years) in Figure 1, and less markedly in Figure 2.

[15]We specifically designate a male for this role, in contrast to a number of proposals fof "para-professionals" in the schools which utilize women from the community or from college training courses. We cannot elaborate on the importance of sex differentiation here, except to indicate that we believe it is a matter of prime importance.